



From the unions

# Amazon in the time of coronavirus

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The tech giant was one of the few companies to benefit from the national lockdowns imposed across the world to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. However, with orders coming in thick and fast, many of Amazon's warehouse workers found themselves at risk due to inadequate health and safety precautions. Labour struggles consequently broke out on both sides of the Atlantic, with mixed results.

It should come as no surprise that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought many of capitalism's contradictions to the surface, magnifying already-existing class, gender and racial inequalities. And while workers have faced looming job insecurities and national lockdowns, one corporation in particular has experienced accelerated growth due to the circumstances: Amazon. With brick-and-mortar stores shutting down, many turned to the established one-stop online store for their shopping needs. It had already been growing at an exponential rate prior to the pandemic, both in established and new markets, from its cloud-computing platform of Amazon Web Services to its growing list of acquisitions and expanding e-commerce platform. Between 2016 and 2019 alone, its global workforce more than doubled, from 341 000 to 798 000 – and bear in mind that this number does not include the contract and temporary workers that Amazon relies on during the peak seasons of Black Friday and Christmas.<sup>1</sup> One can only imagine how its workforce and market share will have increased since the outbreak of Covid-19.

When the pandemic hit, Amazon was one of the corporations that was better equipped to handle the soaring volume of online orders. It had a clear market advantage over other platforms due to its extensive logistics network and supply chain, headed by Jeff Bezos. Investors eagerly observed its growth, which fuelled more investment. Its share value almost doubled during the health crisis, from 1600–1800 dollars per share in March 2020 to almost 3500 dollars by 1 September 2020.<sup>2</sup> However, as orders and performance pressure increased in the warehouses, even this market leader faced a labour shortage in face of the ever-growing demand. Amazon decided to hire more workers and temporarily increase hazard pay to an extra two dollars/pounds/euros per hour. As a consequence, in the US alone 100 000 new workers were hired in March and an additional 75 000 the following month. One thing was clear: Covid-19 had created an opportunity for Amazon to consolidate its power and market share to an even greater extent.

This boom time for the corporation was not, however, void of labour disputes and struggles. Amazon's growth did not go

unnoticed. At times it was celebrated for its expansion, but at others it was scrutinised over its working conditions, including performance pressure and workplace surveillance, and its anti-union corporate culture. The daunting increase in online orders during the pandemic only served to exacerbate these issues, necessitating new health and safety measures at the company. Amazon claims to have, at an early stage, adopted thermal cameras, provided protective personal equipment, encouraged social distancing between workers, and increased both warehouse cleaning and the number of breaks,

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1. "Amazon," Statista, released 2020, [www.statista.com/study/10137/amazoncom-statista-dossier](https://www.statista.com/study/10137/amazoncom-statista-dossier).
2. Amazon.com, Inc. Common Stock (AMZN), accessed 1 September 2020, <https://www.nasdaq.com/market-activity/stocks/amzn>.
3. UNI Global Union, *Amazon & the Covid-19 Crisis: Essentially Irresponsible* (2020), 5, [https://www.uniglobalunion.org/sites/default/files/public\\_shared/amazonCovid-19\\_en\\_pages.pdf](https://www.uniglobalunion.org/sites/default/files/public_shared/amazonCovid-19_en_pages.pdf).

in order to minimise contact between workers. However, the narrative that workers and unions from across the world have told is a different one, emphasising equipment shortages and the near impossibility of distancing on the job in light of rising orders and a growing workforce. The labour struggles that took place at Amazon warehouses in the US and France this year revealed how workers on different continents shared a common concern for their health and safety, and confirmed the vital role that labour organising plays in the battle for better working conditions. In the words of Christy Hoffman, general secretary of UNI Global Union, “Amazon will do the right thing but only if organised workers, government and civil society force its hand.”<sup>3</sup>

↓ Christian Smalls at a demonstration outside an Amazon warehouse in the Staten Island district of New York on 1 May 2020.  
Photo: ©Belga

### Labour struggles in the US: a risky business

The US presents the largest market for Amazon as well as a national terrain of political and economic conditions that leave workers vulnerable, unprotected, easily terminable, and often without the right to paid sick leave. This explains why the first-ever Amazon strike did not take place in the US but instead across the Atlantic, in Germany in 2013. Since then, however, performance pressure has also pushed workers in the US to voice their demands and organise walkouts, as we witnessed with East African workers in Minnesota in 2019, who received support from the Awood Center, a workers-led community centre.

When the pandemic struck, it was difficult to halt the spread of the virus in and across the warehouses, despite the measures Amazon had implemented, such as paid sick leave for those quarantining

or who had tested positive, as well as unlimited unpaid time off. This is because many workers continued to go to work as a result of limited access to testing. By early April, the number of warehouses that had reported at least one case had reached over 50, though the increase became more difficult to track as Amazon stopped disclosing the case numbers. Recognising the limited access to testing, the corporation expanded its paid sick leave policy to cover suspected cases or those caring for others who had tested positive, though workers reported that this was not always known or applied.

As increases in both orders and workers were not necessarily met with sufficient protective equipment and proper implementation of health and safety precautions such as social distancing, workers began to organise walkouts across the country, from California and Minnesota to Chicago and New York. Some workers report consequently receiving disciplinary write-ups and even



being dismissed. One such worker, who received a great deal of media attention, was Christian Smalls. He had helped organise a walkout at the Amazon warehouse in Staten Island, where workers were demanding stricter health and safety measures and the temporary closure of the warehouse for deep cleaning after some workers had tested positive. Amazon claimed that Smalls violated his quarantine and put his co-workers at risk, as he had been sent home after a co-worker had contracted the virus. Smalls argued, however, that he was singled out by the corporation for voicing his concerns, as he was around this worker “for less than five minutes” compared to others who had been in contact for “ten-plus hours a week”.<sup>4</sup> According to a leaked report from Amazon, the company aimed to smear Smalls as “the face of the entire union/organizing movement”, describing him as “not smart, or articulate”.<sup>5</sup> This case is just one of many examples of Amazon squashing attempts at labour organisation, aiming to eliminate union activity in its warehouses and portray it in a negative light.

While workers received support not only from politicians and legislators but also from unions such as the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), these recent cases of labour struggle shed light once again on the difficulties of organising in the US’s largely anti-union landscape, something which predates Covid-19. The pandemic has also, however, revealed the willingness of many workers to voice their concerns and even in certain cases to join in collective action, despite the obstacles. It has, above all, shown the current potential for pushing for more labour-friendly changes in the employment landscape.

### Greater victories for the French workforce

Labour activity has taken on more direct forms of organising in Europe as, depending on the employment contract and national industrial relations system, workers may be entitled to stronger labour rights and protection. A contrasting case study

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Workers and unions pushed for warehouses to be shut down or for Amazon to make it easier for workers to exercise their right to abstain from working<sup>7</sup> while still receiving their wages. Julien Vincent, union representative at the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT), estimates that around 30-40% of all workers stayed home out of fear and/or due to childcare responsibilities. Amazon responded by offering increased wages to those still working and hiring additional temporary workers.

Labour inspectors revealed that Amazon failed to take sufficient health and safety precautions, while also sidestepping unions and works councils, who it is legally required to consult on these matters. The trade union group Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques (SUD) took Amazon to court. The court of Nanterre sided with the workers and ruled on 14 April that warehouses were to be inspected according to the French Labour Code. Until Amazon worked with unions to improve its standards it was to limit sales exclusively to essential items that included medical, hygiene and food products. It would be penalised with a staggering fine of one million euros per day for non-essential sales.

Tatiana Campagne, the SUD representative at the Lauwin-Planque site (northern France), one of Amazon’s biggest fulfilment centres in the country, did not hide her satisfaction: “We’ve been fighting against this giant for three weeks now. For us, this is a great victory. The company has to negotiate with us about putting measures in place. They can’t just continue to act like kings as they have done since the beginning of the crisis.”

Amazon first reacted by appealing and defending its measures. Calculating that the financial toll for violations could possibly reach billions a week, Amazon shut



↑ Anti-Black Friday demonstration outside the Amazon warehouse in Lauwin-Planque (France).  
Photo: ©Belga

Amazon was met with a backlash by the media and politicians who critiqued its lack of health and safety measures and its retaliation tactics. US senators sent a letter to Amazon that stated “any failure of Amazon to keep its workers safe does not just put their employees at risk, it puts the entire country at risk.”<sup>6</sup> The New York Attorney General directly criticised Amazon in relation to its termination of Smalls, while one of Amazon’s vice presidents, Tim Bray, resigned in early May in protest of Amazon’s termination of other employees such as the outspoken user-experience designers Emily Cunningham and Maren Costa, who had also criticised Amazon’s labour practices.

to the US is that of France, where Amazon received the largest pushback from both workers and political and judicial officials. The case of the struggle in France not only echoes the concerns of workers in the US and elsewhere in the world about inadequate implementation of health and safety standards, it also demonstrates that Amazon, which continues to monopolise sectors and markets, can in fact be regulated – should the state wish to do so.

As France went into a national lockdown and retailers were ordered to shut, Amazon workers protested against their working conditions, claiming in particular, as in the US, that many orders were not “essential”.

↓ This Amazon employee in Staten Island, New York, demands to be treated like the company's customers.  
Photo: ©Belga



down all six of its French warehouses, though it could still deliver from across the border. Despite some attempts made by the company to improve measures, on 24 April the Court of Versailles deemed these to be insufficient and upheld the previous court ruling. The penalty, however, was now to be 100 000 euros per delivery and the list of products now included office, pet, and technological supplies.

During this period, Amazon requested to receive state emergency funds to pay its temporarily laid-off workers in warehouses that were ordered to close following a court ruling, only to be rejected by the Ministry of Labour. Warehouses were only allowed to be reopened on 19 May, after Amazon had invested millions of euros in applying 150 new safety measures, such as a 15-minute reduced shift without wage reduction to allow for smoother shift transitions. Amazon reached a settlement agreement with the unions “after going through a formal clarification and information process with works councils about the extensive safety measures already in place at our fulfillment centers to keep our employees safe.”<sup>8</sup> The additional two-euro hazard pay was to be paid until the end of May. In return, unions dropped the case for the exclusive sale of

essential products. As Amazon gradually reopened, unions were consulted over safety measures and their implementation.

The outcome of the labour struggles in France differs from those in the US due to differences in the political-economic and industrial relations contexts regarding workers’ rights to organise and strike. This case demonstrates the potential for regulating the largely unregulated Amazon, should legislators seek to do so, and for Amazon to negotiate with labour representatives, should it be forced to do so.

### A crucial moment for labour

The tale of Amazon and its labour struggles is just one of many in the time of Covid-19 that demonstrates the weakened position of workers across the world, who have seen their rights sidelined by the interests of larger corporations and their pursuit of profit. Amazon is not unique in this regard. Yet while it was easily able to hire thousands of workers to meet higher demand amidst a looming economic crisis, the leverage of workers also grew due to the growing dependence on the retail giant amidst national lockdowns. This has once again

highlighted the necessity not only for labour to organise, but also for support from politicians, legislators and society at large. Amazon appears to change its treatment of workers when faced with pushbacks from protests, strikes and accompanying media scrutiny, but also when politicians and legislators are willing to push for regulation. As the corporation continues to grow and in the process set trends across the industry, now at an even more accelerated rate, the pandemic provides us with a crucial moment to push for better working conditions and support the rights of workers at Amazon, and beyond. ●



### FURTHER READING

Christelle Casse (2019) *Working at Amazon.fr: from honeymoon to divorce*, *HesaMag*, No. 19, p. 49.

4. Paul Blest, “Amazon Fired the Warehouse Worker Who Organized a Walkout Over Coronavirus,” *Vice News*, 31 March 2020, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/5dmea3/amazon-fired-the-warehouse-worker-who-organized-a-walkout-over-coronavirus](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5dmea3/amazon-fired-the-warehouse-worker-who-organized-a-walkout-over-coronavirus).
5. Paul Blest, “Leaked Amazon Memo Details Plan to Smear Fired Warehouse Organizer: ‘He’s Not Smart or Articulate,’” *Vice News*, 2 April 2020, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/5dm8bx/leaked-amazon-memo-details-plan-to-smear-fired-warehouse-organizer-hes-not-smart-or-articulate](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/5dm8bx/leaked-amazon-memo-details-plan-to-smear-fired-warehouse-organizer-hes-not-smart-or-articulate).
6. UNI Global Union, *Amazon & the Covid-19 Crisis*, 46.
7. The right of withdrawal from the workplace exists in all EU countries as well as in other parts of the world. It gives a worker the right to stop his or her work in the case of serious and imminent danger, until sufficient preventive measures have been put in place.
8. Liz Alderman, “Amazon Reaches Deal With French Unions in Coronavirus Safety Dispute,” *The New York Times*, 16 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/16/business/amazon-france-unions-coronavirus.html>.